

The Bologna process and the Czech system of education

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The Czech system of education has been through several years of relatively intensive transformation efforts reflecting the international processes of transformation of higher education the Czech Republic joined. The most important external stimulus directing the transformation process is the so-called Bologna process. These complex and multifaceted processes affect all important areas of university education. Not everything is smooth and easy; achievements are accompanied by controversial issues and challenges. This paper will deal with some areas of transformation of Czech university education – with respect to relation to the Bologna process. The paper provides a general survey of especially restructuring, the credit system, permeability, degree recognition, lifelong learning, the European dimension, mobility, quality and its assessment, and research and discusses teacher education in more detail. It is based on documents characterizing Czech higher education and its transformation¹ as well as the author's empirical observations – the author of this text has worked at a Czech university since 1993 without interruption.

Some data to begin with

The Czech Republic is a country with 10.2 million people. In the academic year 2002/2003 there were 215 thousand students studying at 25 public and 4 state higher education institutions and another 8 thousand students at 36 private universities. The number of students increased rapidly after 1989: while there were 89,200 students studying at Czech universities in the academic year 1989/1990 there were as many as 235,900 university students in 2002/2003.²

The Czech Republic participates in the Bologna process – it has signed the Sorbonna Declaration (1998), the Bologna Declaration (1999) and the Lisbon Treaty (2002) as well as other related documents developed within the same framework.

Restructuring

Restructuring of university education has obtained a legal basis as early as in 1998³ and the first significant change motivated by the Bologna process goes back to 2000. Fundamental restructuring at a majority of Czech universities had been completed by 2004. The original “long” master degree programmes were typically replaced by three-year BA programmes and two-year continuing master degree programmes. Postgraduate programmes remained the third level of university studies.

The number of students studying in bachelor and postgraduate programmes increased significantly over the period. The change occurred as part of the efforts to achieve the goal set

¹ The basic data collection for this paper was performed by Kateřina Radvanová and Jana Matulová, students of Educational sciences at the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno.

² Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: Koncepce reformy vysokého školství v ČR. (A Concept of University Education Reform in the Czech Republic) Prague 2004. www.msmt.cz

³ Higher Education Act 1998.

by the strategic document called the White Book – to have as many as one half of the total number of students finishing their studies by obtaining a BA degree or a diploma from post-secondary schools. And conversely, the number of students of (two-year) continuing master programmes and non-structured master programmes (lasting for five years – which have survived in a few specializations such as medicine, pharmacology, and several others only) stabilized.

The restructuring however implied a need for adjusting the newly structured programmes at the level of content, which was not an easy task for many universities and university departments. “A number of applications submitted present the proposed BA programmes of studies as “condensed” versions of analogous master programmes (especially as far as disciplines of law are concerned), resulting in a situation when their graduates would not be adequately prepared for the profession”⁴, as relevant documents characterize some accompanying problems arising in this context. These difficulties are nevertheless tackled successfully in the process.

It may be summed up that three-stage university studies are gradually becoming the norm in Czech higher education and the public is getting used to the system – finding it most difficult to get used to bachelor programmes. Bachelor degrees still puzzle people, who continue to view them as lower-grade, “unfinished” qualification (bachelor diplomas have no substantial tradition in the Czech environment). Individual industries, too, are slow to create a system of qualification structures and opportunities for career development of graduates holding bachelor degrees. The issue of bachelor programmes offered by higher vocational colleges is gradually addressed as well.

Credit system

Another area of transformation at Czech higher education institutions is the wide implementation of credit systems such as ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) or compatible. It was especially representatives of those Czech higher education institutions that were the first to take initiative in this respect who regarded the credit system – among other things – as the necessary prerequisite for participation of their universities in the European student mobility programme Socrates – Erasmus⁵. A majority of public as well as private higher education institutions used a credit system (mostly ECTS) as early as in 2001. The faculties that were the last to implement the system did so in the academic year 2004/2005. In line with the common practice in other countries, Czech higher education institutions apply the credit system usually through specific information systems enabling students to create their individual study plans and time schedules for each semester. Credits are transferable, which is increasingly taken advantage of by students studying at Czech higher education institutions as well as those who, thanks to mobility programmes (see below), complete part of their studies abroad.

Although creation and application of credit systems has proved to be a relatively successful step forward, it has involved and continues to involve at least several challenges coped with by different higher education institutions with a different degree of success. One of the tasks is to find an adequate weight of the credit reflecting the work done by the student and by the teacher and to harmonize this aspect of crediting within study programmes, but also at the level of faculties and universities and across them. Another task is to find ways of creating more scope

⁴ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: A Strategy for the Development of Tertiary Education till 2005 (2010). Prague 2000.

⁵ Comp. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: An Annual Report on the Situation in Higher Education for 2000.

for independent student work – week schedules at some, especially regional higher education institutions look like high school timetables due to excessive numbers of hours of obligatory direct instruction and a lack of scope for optionals and tracking opportunities.

It seems it still holds true that “the situation is not entirely ideal in reality, but it may be said that Czech higher education institutions have more or less grown accustomed to the credit system and that it is not necessary to make its use a statutory obligation.”⁶

Permeability

In its heterogeneity, permeability seems to be one of the significant, ambitious, and also attractive, but at the same time not easily accessible goals of transformation of the Czech educational system.

It is *vertical* permeability that has mainly been implemented so far. The aim is to create opportunities for students to go on with their studies at the same or another institution after obtaining their BA degree. The state of art varies from programme to programme and from specialization to specialization. While in some cases that kind of permeability is a real option accessible to a broad student community, other specializations seem sealed to the external world and characterized by a kind of fatal predetermination by the programme studied at the bachelor level. As far as vertical permeability is concerned, bottom-up permeability (from a BA programme into a continuing master programme) is thus available only for programmes with identical or very close specializations. The permeability can thus be described as limited in this sense. Top-down vertical permeability (i.e. from a higher level to a lower one) has hardly been addressed at all. It has to do to a certain extent with the generally weak links between higher education institutions and higher vocational colleges and with the labour market.

As far as *horizontal* permeability (i.e. switching between individual programmes) is concerned, it is implemented by development of an offer of elective subjects at a number of schools.

Achieving permeability in its many aspects thus seems to be a comprehensive task not only for higher education institutions, but also for the external environment they operate in.

Degree recognition

Recognition of international degrees and qualifications in the Czech Republic is regulated by the Higher Education Act and concerns graduates of institutions of higher education abroad. As to graduates of Czech higher education institutions, they should – in line with the international agreements the Czech Republic has signed – receive a diploma supplement in one of the European languages with wide distribution since 2005.

Legal diction enables reviewing for recognition purposes of education obtained at foreign higher education institutions operating in the Czech Republic or education obtained at institutions established in agreement with the Czech law provided they offer accredited study programmes. If however a provider of transnational education happens to be a subject established in agreement with the Czech law who provides no accredited study programmes, it is not regarded

⁶ Comp. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: A Concept of Higher Education Reform in the Czech Republic, Prague 2004, p. 35.

as a higher education institution. This amounts to the fact that disregarding the quality of the study programme, a number of diplomas may not be reviewed for recognition at all⁷.

⁷ Comp. Skuhrová, Š., Transnárodní vzdělávání (Transnational Education). In: Aula, 2003, vol. 11, pp. 78-84, p. 84.

Lifelong learning

In the recent years higher education institutions have tended to create study opportunities that may be classified within the category of lifelong learning activities. These opportunities include a range of non-degree, mostly paid courses focusing on extending or deepening the professional profile of the participants, third age universities and other opportunities.

The goal in this case is however other than using the new offer to imitate the syllabi of accredited study programmes offered by higher education institutions. It is nevertheless highly desirable that upon a graduate's potential enrolment into an accredited study programme, education obtained in these courses is recognized to the highest degree possible⁸. This however has not been the reality yet: credits granted in courses of lifelong learning are not always recognized when their holders are trying to claim them when enrolling into accredited degree study programmes (despite the fact that these credits may be recognized up to 60% of syllabi content of the whole degree programme).

Despite remarkable progress as far as some lifelong learning opportunities at higher education institutions are concerned, at least several obstacles persist. The first one is traditionalism informing the perception of higher education institutions as academic ones whose mission is to provide integrated university education and to run the associated research and development⁹. Another tradition that is to be overcome is underestimating and mistrust towards degrees and certificates won in courses organized as part of lifelong learning, which represent a full-fledged educational offer and provide study opportunities for applicants with diverse needs and abilities¹⁰.

It may generally be concluded that the level of lifelong learning development in different parts of the tertiary sector varies; its state of art in some institutions continues to be a weakness of its development while lifelong learning is paid its due in other institutions, being offered in a wide range of subjects, as intramural, intramural/extramural as well as extramural studies.

In 2003, most programmes of lifelong learning were offered in the category of educational sciences, teacher training and social work and social sciences, theories and services, which contribute to increasing the professional qualification of people in education and to development of the personal profile of students. The fewest programmes of lifelong learning were offered in psychological disciplines, which may be explained by their specific focus.¹¹ One specific form of lifelong learning are Third Age Universities, which were operating at 19 public higher education institutions in 2003. Third Age Universities represent a specific form of education for the older population.¹²

Lifelong learning development at higher education institutions has received grant support from the Ministry of Youth and Education of the Czech Republic within the Programme of Support to Lifelong Learning (in 2003). The currently prevailing opinion in the Czech Republic is that

⁸ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: The White Book. Národní program rozvoje vzdělávání v ČR. (National Programme of Development of Education in the Czech Republic) Prague 2001, pp. 72-73.

⁹ Comp. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: A Strategy for the Development of Tertiary Education till 2005 (2010), p. 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 20

¹¹ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: Annual Report on the Situation in Higher Education for 2003.

¹² Ibid., p. 31.

higher education institutions should aspire to grants from the European Social Fund that for which Czech institutions are eligible for the first time this year¹³.

¹³ Comp. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: A Concept of a Higher Education Reform in the Czech Republic. Prague 2004.

European dimension

The Czech higher education system, like the whole country, had lived in a relative international isolation for long decades before 1989: some more intensive relations could be developed only within the so-called Eastern Block. This may be one of the reasons why a rather significant trend to developing – in various ways – the European dimension of education could be observed over the recent 15 years and especially a few most recent years. The main role seems to be played by programmes Socrates, Leonardo, Phare and some other European schemes, which were coming to be known even by people at higher education institutions rather slowly, but did play a positive role in supporting the European dimension of activities by higher education institutions.

It was at the very onset of this decade that one of the key documents of the Czech higher education system, *A Strategy for the Development of Tertiary Education till 2005 (2010)*, that it was claimed that international (especially European) cooperation of universities within their own initiatives as well as within international agreements ranks among the strengths of the system of tertiary education. Even the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports nevertheless regards further support of international cooperation as necessary at present. This concerns not only the above-mentioned programmes and exchanges, but also a range of bilateral activities, cooperation in research, development and many other areas of activities of higher education institutions. Czech higher education is generally characterized not only by efforts focused on putting through internationally agreed forms of diploma recognition, but also removing limitations and regulation of the access to education among all citizens of the Czech Republic as well as the other EU member countries.

The recent and current discussion on EU issues has shown that in the Czech Republic, too, the European dimension is something that must be permanently discussed, subjected to critical thinking and meaningful development – including in the field of higher education.

Mobility

Czech higher education institutions were gradually involved in mobility programmes since the 1990s, primarily within the programme TEMPUS, then ERASMUS, the new TEMPUS, CEEPUS and others. Student mobility is assigned relatively big emphasis in the Czech educational system. E.g. the key document called the *White Book* states that the goal is to achieve a state when every student at the tertiary level of education will spend part of his/her studies outside his/her own school, at a foreign institution if possible. Another goal is to support mobility among university teachers. Yet another ambition of the Czech system of education has been to open Czech schools to foreign students.¹⁴ There are however not only achievements. The weaknesses of the Czech system of education – compared with other countries – include the number of students and teachers participating in international mobility.¹⁵ Three thousand of Czech students were involved in mobility programmes in 2003.

Czech students studying abroad nevertheless still outweigh foreign students coming for scholarships at Czech higher education institutions. Instruction in foreign languages was accredited in 124 bachelor, 210 continuing master, 156 “long” master and 354 postgraduate

¹⁴ Comp. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: *The White Book. A National Programme of Development of Education in the Czech Republic*. Prague 2001.

¹⁵ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: *A Strategy of Development of Tertiary Education 2005 (2010)*, p. 30.

programmes at Czech higher education institutions.¹⁶ It is generally believed that all aspects of this area of operation of higher education institutions should receive continuous support.

Quality and its evaluation

Czech higher education is characterized by processes of both external and internal (self-) evaluation. One of the basic tools for using the results of evaluation processes is making them accessible to the broad public. Quality assessment concerns equally educational work, research, development and other creative activities pursued at Czech higher education institutions.

As to external evaluation, it consists mainly in accreditation processes (the Accreditation Commission is an important body representing autonomy of higher education – it takes decisions on granting, restricting or withdrawing the right to implement specific educational programmes to higher education institutions), sometimes one-off evaluations of some higher education institutions or faculties, evaluation activities performed as part of international evaluation projects etc.

As to internal evaluation, it may take a number of forms depending on the status of the particular higher education institution. It is a sensitive, permanent and continuously updated activity pertaining not only to educational activities of higher education institutions, but also their research and development activities and other important areas.

Research

Research activities of higher education institutions have increased significantly (from 1990), some sources state¹⁷. In this process, research has been becoming an element differentiating among individual higher education institutions and their parts, as the key document, the *White Book*, has predicted:¹⁸

“Suitable combinations of the types of study programmes with corresponding research and other creative activities will lead in the future to creation of three characteristic groups of higher education institutions:

- Higher education institutions where most master and postgraduate study programmes will be significantly marked by top-quality research and education in research work.
- Higher education institutions where research and education in research work will be a feature of one or a few programmes while the remaining programmes will have a predominantly practical professional orientation integrating applied research and various kinds of creative activities.
- Higher education institutions focusing mainly on bachelor programmes integrating creative activities (higher education institutions of non-university type).”

This differentiation seems to be the case.

¹⁶ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: Annual Report on the Situation in Higher Education for 2003, p. 21.

¹⁷ Comp. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: A Concept of a Higher Education Reform in the Czech Republic. Prague 2004.

¹⁸ Comp. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: The White Book. A National Programme of Development of Education in the Czech Republic. Prague 2001, p. 70

One relatively significant feature of Czech national politics of the recent years has been an emphasis on high-volume research tasks and their support (research projects, research centres etc. – usually for 5-7 years) along with preservation of grant opportunities for smaller projects. Statements of policy issued by recent governments speak of 1% of the GNP for research and development from public funds till 2010; funding from private subjects and other sources is to play a more important role in the future.

One weakness continues to be the relation between research at higher education institutions and the business domain. Strengthening research activities of higher education institutions and greater involvement of students in research activities and projects are held to be of primary importance¹⁹. The differentiation of higher education institutions or their parts according to research results which we have discussed above is being associated with a significant increase of support to research at higher education institution.

The European dimension of research activities and their support is associated especially with gradual integration of Czech higher education institutions into framework programmes and, this year for the first time, also with research support from the European Social Fund.

Teacher education and training

Teacher education is a specific issue, especially from the point of view of its restructuring along the lines set by the Bologna process and its modularity, which should be implemented not only at individual faculties, but also in effective cooperation of scientific and arts faculties, it is emphasized in the key strategic document of the development of Czech higher education as early as in 2000²⁰.

Pre-service teacher training is fully provided by public higher education institutions. The tradition of the recent decades has been the five-year master programme for teachers of the sixth to twelfth grade and four-year master programme for teachers of the first to fifth grade. This framework contained both pedagogical-psychological modules and modules concerning the subject/s the degree holder was to teach in a qualified way within the formal system of education. Efforts to make pre-service teacher education close to what has largely been understood as the Bologna concept in the Czech environment involve some problems and controversial issues.

Approximately since 2000 opinions stressing the need for a reform of teacher education provided by higher education institutions involving especially a cost-effective shortening of the existing 4-5-year programmes to 3-4 years have been sounded with much more confidence. Representatives of the educational community tend to regard this trend as unacceptable, for a number of reasons. The main ones are as follows:

- Given the Czech interpretation of the bachelor level of education, the step would result in a significant decrease in quality of teacher education – modern approaches tend to seek effectiveness in programme modulation rather than change of the length of study.
- The shortening would mean immediate, but short-time cost savings since the situation regarding qualification at higher education institutions would deteriorate even more within next few years.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic: A Strategy of Development of Tertiary Education 2005 (2010).

- The trend towards shortening teacher education programmes is coming “from the top”, not from universities and other higher education institutions, which have requested to resolve teacher education by introducing a two-level system of theoretical-practical education at higher education institutions and practical training supervised by the Educational Administration.
- Saying that programme shortening is proposed by the Bologna declaration as some in the Czech environment do is a “very specific approach” in the least – indeed a misinterpretation.

The general consensus is that teacher education must be transformed, but approaches to the ways and results of the transformation diverge. As late as in 2003 the Czech Republic was still among the states that had not introduced the two-level system of pre-service teacher education. Restructuring nevertheless occurred after that, although with varying results. Some higher education institutions are now offering pedagogically driven bachelor degree programmes and on this basis students continue in a continuing (2-year) master degree programme of teacher education. Some other higher education institutions are trying to assign most of the teaching content relating to the subject to the bachelor programme so that the continuing master programme can be largely devoted to pedagogical-psychological education of students organized in close relation to the subjects to be taught by the students.

The most frequently discussed issues in this debate are the issue of permeability (especially permeability between the bachelor and continuing master degree is usually not sufficient), the issue of relation and ratio between the pedagogical-psychological and the subject-specialization component of the programme, the issue of compatibility with the needs of the labour market (graduates of bachelor programmes of teacher education experience difficulties when searching for a job as educational assistants), the issue of the general status of the teaching profession and teacher education etc. The last topic is one highly sensitive for the educational community.

Minimum (national) standards for pre-service teacher education (its pedagogical-psychological component) are currently being developed.

As far as *in-service* teacher education and training is concerned, involvement in activities of continuing education is currently not obligatory for teachers. Despite the fact there is a wide offer many teachers take advantage of. Higher education institutions themselves create and organize part of this offer – within the framework of lifelong learning and education activities (e.g. courses in school management).

Conclusion

The Czech educational system has been experiencing an important transformation since 1990. The Bologna process undoubtedly has been and will continue to be a significant stimulus defining the direction and character of this transformation, in virtually all main areas of operation of higher education institutions. It involves a whole range of ideas which are perceived as attractive or at least meaningful especially by people critical of the lack of flexibility, certain rigidity, closeness, and isolatedness of the former arrangement of the Czech system of education. And these people are a majority. Moreover, this direction of transformation has political support. This means, in my opinion, good expectations for Czech higher education.